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SUBJECT: UNION AND GOVERNMENT REPORTEDLY REACH TENTATIVE
AGREEMENT AFTER ISRAELI LABOR COURT ORDERS STRIKING
SECONDARY TEACHERS BACK TO WORK

REF: TEL AVIV 3232

¶1. Summary. On December 4, The National Labor Court ordered striking teachers back to work following the Hanukah festival. The court also ordered the teachers and government to continue negotiating. Education Minister Yuli Tamir was quoted as being satisfied with the decision, and calling for the Secondary School Teachers Organization (SSTO) to return to the negotiating table. On December 9, PM Olmert called on the SSTO to conclude negotiations by the end of Hanukah vacation so that the education system would not have to operate under court orders. SSTO chairman Ran Erez harshly criticized the court's decision, however, and had previously protested that the state was "refusing to negotiate." According to media reports, the two sides reached an agreement in principle during December 10 meetings that would have for the teachers to return to work December 13 following the Hanukah holiday. The agreement includes a modest wage increase and reduced class sizes in exchange for more teaching hours. Concurrently, hundreds of teachers protested PM Olmert's December 10 speech at the Israeli Business Conference. Histadrut contacts said that a national strike (reftel) is unlikely for now. End summary.

¶2. Most secondary teachers in Israel have been striking off and on since April 2007 over low wages, large classes, and increased work loads. This fall's SSTO strike has been far and away the longest teachers' strike since at least 1978, according to Shlomo Maital of Technion Institute of Management in a recent Jerusalem Report article. The elementary teachers' union settled their strike in 2006 for a 26% wage increase over five years, but that came with an increase in both class size and number of classes taught, two major elements of the proposed changes to the educational system that the SSTO has rejected. (Members of a smaller secondary teachers' union accepted those conditions when they settled with the government in 2006. The Government has run some expensive newspaper ads with members of the smaller union extolling the deal, while at the same other members of the smaller union have been out demonstrating in support of the SSTO and against the deal their union struck.)

¶3. SSTO leader Erez told LRO that GOI education funding and policies are bringing down the historically high level of Israeli schools. Recent media reports have echoed that alarm, citing declining test scores by Israeli students. For example, a December 4 Jerusalem Post report said that Israeli students ranked 40th out of 57 countries that took part in an international examination of reading, math and science for 15-year-olds. A related concern is that the financial struggles and personal frustrations facing many teachers are driving the best ones out of the profession -- or dissuading them from entering it in the first place. A December 6 Haaretz article told the story of a 32 year old teacher of children with severe learning disabilities whose salary is approximately \$1,300 a month -- extremely low wages in an expensive country like Israel -- and is currently supporting

himself as a waiter. The article describes him as feeling defeated and humiliated, and unsure as to whether he will defy the court's back-to-work order. It is unclear not only how many of the teachers will return to work this month as ordered, but how many might choose to never return to work at all.

¶4. According to media reports, the two sides reached an agreement in principal during December 10 meetings that would have the teachers return to work -- without a court order -- on December 13, following the Hanukah holiday. Lost school days will apparently be returned to students during the Passover holiday and summer vacation. The agreement includes reduced class sizes and more teaching hours, and a modest but immediate 8.5 percent wage increase that could rise to a 26 percent raise as part of a broader reform that is still being negotiated. Meetings between the Government and the SSTO continued on December 11. Olmert - who did not meet Erez until a December 9 ceremony to light Hanukah candles - warned at a December 2 cabinet meeting that a wage hike would not be "gratuitous," meaning more teaching hours.

¶5. Comment. Recent polls suggest that 64% of the public supported the teachers' position, and more than 100,000 parents and other backers gathered at a November 17 rally in support of the teachers. The public support does not seem to have led to much political support, however. PM Olmert's latest reported offer of an 8.5 per cent wage increase would still leave the salary for new teachers below the poverty line. If the reported agreement stands, the teachers will back to work, although a final agreement would still need to be worked out. The question of whether all the teachers will return, and whether the SSTO membership will consider the agreement a satisfactory response to the demands they have were willing to shut down the schools for almost two months

in support of, remains to be seen. End comment.

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